

# 21 | 19

CONTEMPORARY POETS  
IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY ARCHIVE

## READER'S GUIDE

ASSEMBLED BY CO-EDITORS  
KRISTEN CASE & ALEXANDRA MANGLIS

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CONTEMPORARY POETS  
IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY ARCHIVE

Edited by Kristen Case & Alexandra Manglis  
FOREWORD BY FRED MOTEN

WITH ESSAYS BY JOSÉ FELIPE ALVERGUE | DAN BEACHY-QUICK | JOSHUA BENNETT  
BENJAMIN FRIEDLANDER | STEFANIA HEIM | JOAN NAVIYUK KANE | CECILY PARKS  
M. NOURBESE PHILIP | COLE SWENSEN | BRIAN TEARE | KAREN WEISER | LILA WILSON

The nineteenth century is often viewed as a golden age of U.S. literature, in which national identity was emergent and ideals such as freedom, democracy, and individual agency were promising, even if belied in reality by violence and hypocrisy. As the twenty-first century unfolds in a United States characterized by deep divisions, diminished democracy, and dramatic transformation of identities, the co-editors of *21 | 19* approach a dozen North American poets, asking them to engage with texts by their predecessors in a manner that avoids both aloofness from the past and too-easy elegy.

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## FROM THE ANTHOLOGY

"My aim in assembling this particular constellation of works is, first, to assert the political significance of blueness as a mode and means by which we might imagine the end of an anti-Black world and the dawning of a more equitable social order."  
—Joshua Bennett

"In this way the nasturtium is the work of poetry; gardening by lantern light is the work of poetry; stepping out of your father's house at night in your night clothes is the work of poetry."  
—Cecily Parks

"Thinking is to dig down into the matter itself, to give over to the old occult sense that only within things can their truest worth be found—vein evocative not only of gold and silver and diamond, but also of blood, also of the earth-thing that is the body."  
—Dan Beachy-Quick

"It's a disjunctive moment—the image of Emily Dickinson making Black Cake. Is it the same Black Cake that now sits in the back of the car? A traditional Christmas delicacy that is woven into my memory of home, childhood, my mother, loss, exile, and the (im)possibility of women like my mother making poetry, or any art for that matter, at a time when manual work extended from sunrise to sun-down."  
—M. NourbeSe Philip

"Though Taylor delineates his emotional state with exquisite care, leaving undelineated the particulars giving rise to it, I made the particulars my focus, presumptuous in my belief that I knew them. Inverting Taylor's own interest in the poem, I place greater emphasis on 'cause' than 'effects,' naming that cause . . . 'homosexuality.'"  
—Benjamin Friedlander

"I hope that the surface movement of thinking through some difficult thoughts can be a lingering, a hesitation to say and move on. Like Emily Dickinson's dashes, hesitation is capable of both holding off and knitting together, of dwelling in, and longing."  
—Karen Weiser

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## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Often when students and other readers approach the literature of the nineteenth century, it is by way of individual, canonical writers. In contrast, the editors of this anthology stress its collective, collaborative approach to the nineteenth-century archive, noting the way the essays speak to one another and the collective voices shape the whole. What difference does this collective approach make to our thinking about the nineteenth century?
2. How do the experiences and perspectives of the contributors shape the visions their essays reflect of the nineteenth-century archive? How does it alter our understanding of the archive to see, for example, Leila Wilson reading Whitman through the diagnosis of her disease, or to hear Joan Naviyuk Kane's grandfather's voice alongside Herman Melville's?
3. This anthology was conceived and produced in a time of ecological, political, and social crisis. *21 | 19* bears the traces of this moment of urgency and seeks to amplify the voices of writers who occupied these crises long before they were front page news. What do they suggest about what Leila Wilson calls "learning how to live within damage"?
4. How do the essays in this anthology—all of them, but perhaps especially those by Cole Swenson, M. NourbeSe Philip, Joan Naviyuk Kane, Stefania Heim, and José Filipe Alvergue—challenge the protocols of the scholarly or academic essay? How do these formal challenges echo or complicate the ideas and texts the essays engage?
5. The introduction opens with the sentence, "This book is a series of intimate encounters." How does the idea of an encounter shape the individual essays and the book as a whole? What kinds of emotions are evoked by these encounters? Who or what did you encounter for the first time in reading the book?
6. One of the central questions this book wishes to ask is, how should contemporary writers engage the literary past? Some of the writers in this book—for example Dan Beachy-Quick, Stefania Heim, Karen Weiser, and Joan Naviyuk Kane—seek to complicate or enrich our understanding of the canonical writers of what is sometimes called "The American Renaissance." Others—Benjamin Friedlander, José Felipe Alvergue, and Joshua Bennett—seek to unsettle our picture of the period by attending to writers excluded from that canon. How do you respond to these different strategies of relating to the U.S. literary tradition? What are the costs and benefits, or risks and rewards, of these respective approaches?

7. As we worked on this anthology, the editors realized that practices of citation were central to the work of many of the volume's contributors. The footnote, endnote, or attribution is itself a marker of an encounter with the past, and in some cases, the writers in this anthology deliberately subvert or artfully reimagine the citation as part of their own formal explorations. How do the notes in Joan Naviyuk Kane, Benjamin Friedlander, or José Felipe Alvergue's essays contribute to the essays' formal structures?
8. The introduction to this book quotes Emerson's essay, "The Poet": "For it is not metres, but a metre-making argument that makes a poem,—a thought so passionate and alive that like the spirit of a plant or an animal it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing." How does the fact that the writers of these essays are poets shape the perspectives they give us of the nineteenth century? In what ways do you see the relationship between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries figured in this anthology?
9. In his foreword to the anthology, Fred Moten writes, "Kristen Case and Alexandra Manglis have put together something beautiful and deep about how things go together in a place that sells, but no longer prides, itself on having figured out how things go together better than any other place, at any time. This anthology tells the truth and exposes that lie..." How can Moten's formulation help us understand the relationship between the collective that is a nation and the collective that is an anthology? In what ways does this book suggest national or formal cohesion? In what ways does it resist such "go[ing] together"?
10. Several ideas or images resurface throughout this anthology. How does the idea of the earth as site of death, decay, and/or apocalypse figure in the essays of Leila Wilson, Dan Beachy-Quick, Joshua Bennett, and Stefania Heim? How does a thematic concern with darkness, or what Cecily Parks calls "night poetics," inform the essays by Parks and Cole Swenson?
11. In his essay on Bayard Taylor, Benjamin Friedlander writes, "Artistic strength or fatal indirection, the reticence of Taylor's poetry is also a lure, leading later readers ... to name directly and discuss frankly what the work itself kept unnamed." How do the essays in this anthology—in particular those by Friedlander and Brian Teare—engage with queerness in contemporary poetics and the texts of the nineteenth century? How does historical distance complicate this engagement?
12. Brian Teare writes that Tommy Pico, a contemporary NDN poet, "returns again and again to instances of resisting settler colonialism: he resists writing 'a nature poem,' resists collapsing indigenous peoples into the category of 'the natural,' and resists the category of Nature itself." How do these essays, in particular those by Joan Naviyuk Kane, Karen Weiser, M. NourbeSe Philip, or José Felipe Alvergue participate in resistance to colonialism and categorization?
13. The penultimate essay in the collection, by M. NourbeSe Philip, lingers on the idea of Emily Dickinson's kitchen as a "combustible space" where wealthy white women stand hip to hip with Black and Irish maids as they cook Caribbean delicacies made of ingredients most often sourced from slavery plantations. Philip writes that "the taste of the sugared spices of the Caribbean lingered on the tongues of the inhabitants of the Dickinson Homestead...deformed, though unaware, by the same history of empire, colonialism and racism." Can one find other similar "combustible spaces" in the anthology, though differently named, where a common history pulls the marginalized and non-marginalized into the same space and makes for a newly understood legacy?

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